Volume 4 | Number 1 Article 3

6-1976

King's Mountain: A Kentucky Link To The Bicentennial

King's Mountain: A Kentucky Link To The Bicentennial

Keith M. Heim, Ph.D.

When Kentucky's Bicentennial celebration began to shift into high gear in 1974, one might have wondered at times what special significance the Revolution had for Kentuckians: Kentucky was not one of the original thirteen states, and although it was technically a part of Virginia, settlement had scarcely begun and no major battles were fought here. At first glance, the Jackson Puchase, lying hundreds of miles west of the frontier had an even more tenuous connection with that conflict.

It takes, however, little more than a casual inquiry into the Battle of King's Mountain, which occurred on the border between the Carolinas in October of 1780, to realize that Kentuckians, and more particularly West Kentuckians, can hold their heads high along with the descendants of the men of Lexington, Valley Forge, and Saratoga for the contributions of their ancestors to the winning of the War for Independence. That battle, thought by many historians to be one of the two or three most important battles of the entire war, was fought and won by the men of the Watauga, forbears of many present day citizens of the Purchase. It is this battle which provides a direct link for Kentuckians with the Revolution and the celebration of its Bicentennial.

Certainly, many other battles during the Revolution involved larger numbers of men and were fought in places far less remote than the lightly settled area in which King's Mountain was located. But the battle resulted in the failure of England's grand strategy for winning the war during the latter stages of the Revolution, and a consideration of the setting in which the battle took place will indicate its vital significance in the winning of the conflict and the importance of the Wataugans' contribution.

When the war in the North had continued to turn sour after the Battle of Saratoga in 1777, the British, seeking a way to turn the tide of events and secure final victory, decided to shift their main theatre of operations to the southern colonies. An important factor in this decision was the insistance of Loyalist advisers that the majority of the population in the South held Loyalist sentiments, and would flock to the royal standard should the British make a show of force there. Joined by the sympathetic Cherokees and Creeks, the Loyalists maintained that the combined army of regulars, Tories, and Indians would then turn northward, rolling the colonial defenders before them into Virginia where combined land and naval forces would defeat Washington's army and sweep into New England.

Twice before, similar predictions of mass support in the South had failed to materialize, and British hopes had met with defeat. But the frustrations of the defeats and the stalemate in the North made it all

too easy for British planners in Whitehall and the drawing rooms of London to accept at face value Tory exaggerations as to the numbers and intentions of the King's men in the South. Accordingly, the decision was made to mount a major campaign to capture Charleston and quickly subdue the Carolinas, which would then serve as a secure base for launching the final knock-out blow to the North.

The early months of the southern campaign seemed to foreshadow the total success of the plan. A considerable force under the command of Sir Henry Clinton landed below Charleston on February 11, 1780, and worked its way northward.[1] In early May, General Benjamin Lincoln recognized the inevitable and surrendered the city.[2] The loss of Charleston, the chief port of the South, in itself represented a severe blow to the Americans, but the magnitude of the defeat can be further appreciated when it is realized that Lincoln also surrendered nearly six thousand badly needed soldiers, one hundred fifty-seven guns and other supplies, large numbers of small arms, and 50,000 pounds of gunpowder![3]

With the fall of Charleston, colonial fortunes had reached rock bottom. Dispirited by the false rumor that Congress was considering suing for peace and giving up the southern states in the process, many assumed that the battle for independence had been lost and sought whatver accommodation they might make with the British. Clinton's call for friends of the King to rally to the standard met with gratifying response, and many leaders of the rebellion in the eastern part of South Carolina laid down their arms and accepted the generous parole offered by the victors, promising never to take up arms against the King again and returning to their peacetime occupations.

Clinton almost immediately sent his second in command, Lord Cornwallis, to subdue the interior of the state and establish a line of fortified posts from east to west (including Camden, Niney-Six, and Augusta) to prevent rebel incursions into the state from North Carolina. The campaign met with little initial resistance, and by early June Clinton optimistically wrote his superiors in London, "I may venture to assert that there are few men in South Carolina who are not either our prisoners or in arms with us."[4] Departing a few days later to direct British operations at New York, he left an apparently thoroughly subdued and pacified colony under the victorious army now led by Cornwallis. He wrote, "I leave Lord Cornwallis here with sufficient force to keep it [Charleston] against the world." Upon his departure, he instructed his successor to make the safety of Charleston and South Carolina his chief objective — one not to be endangered by any premature move into North Carolina. Charleson, the vital base for future operations toward the Chesapeake, must be kept secure at all costs.[5] Prospects for an early commencement of the sweep through North Carolina into Virginia, however, seemed excellent indeed.

Despite the auspicious beginning, events in South Carolina were not to unfold as smoothly as Clinton hoped. In the process of pacifying

the interior of the state, the British committed two serious mistakes which were to negate those early successes and seal their ultimate defeat at King's Mountain. Clinton, made overconfident perhaps by the rapid progress of the subjugation of the interior, announced shortly before his departure that everyone, on pain of being considered and treated as a rebel, must take an oath of allegiance to the Crown and **actively** support the royal government. To patriots who had turned themselves in and accepted parole as neutrals this arbitrary change in the terms of the contract offered after the fall of Charleston seemed to be a gross betrayal. Many rejected their status as neutrals and now joined up with the guerrilla forces under Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter, and Andrew Pickens in harassing the English in the interior. The dying spark of resistance, rekindled by this reversal of policy, was fanned into full flame by the depredations of Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton, one of Cornwallis' subordinate commanders. In a series of engagements during late spring and early summer, Tarleton and his men refused quarter to surrendering militia, ignoring the white flag and slaughtering prisoners and the wounded. In late May, in the Waxhaws in present day Lancaster County, he butchered more than a hundred defenseless patriots, spreading disgust and indignation through the state and giving rise to the shibboleth, "Tarleton's Quarter," which meant no quarter at all and was to serve as the inspiration to many a colonial who fought to the death rather than surrender. Conversely, Tarleton's depredations served to disaffect some of the Tories who had rushed to the British standard. And as the interior began to erupt with the guerrilla raids of Marion, Sumter, and Pickens, Tarleton was provoked into new excesses which served in turn as further examples for the burgeoning patriot cause.

During the summer months, as the harassing raids of the colonials increased, another prospect appeared to cloud Clinton's sunny expectations for the southern campaign. Heading southward from the Chesapeake was an American force of about 3,000 troops under the able leadership of Baron de Kalb. Shortly after the force entered North Carolina, the force was put under the uncertain leadership of General Horatio Gates, darling of congressional politics and the so-called "Hero of Saratoga." Gates immediately issued march orders, hoping to surprise the British garrison at Camden. Ignoring the advice of his subordinate officers who knew the area, he chose the shortest route to Camden, a route which led through the sand hill region where few provisions might be obtained and where Tory sympathizers abounded. Consequently, Gates' troops arrived in the vicinity of Camden in mid-August hungry, ill, and on the verge of mutiny.

Meanwhile, Cornwallis had taken note of the threat to his force at Camden, which was under the command of Lord Rawdon. Heeding also reports that Rawdon was being menaced by a sizeable body of troops under Sumter, Cornwallis himself moved with reinforcements to Camden on August 14. While moving out to engage Gates two days later, the British force ran unexpectedly into the surprised Americans during the pre-dawn darkness of August 15.

In one of the fiercest fights of the entire war, the colonials held their own until Gates' ineffective leadership and their own consternation at a British bayonet charge caused their lines to break, throwing the army into panic and headlong retreat. In the ensuing rout, General Gates led the way to the rear, outdistancing everyone on a well-known race horse and leaving a scene of indescribable slaughter and confusion. Tarleton's estimate of the American loss, exaggerated a bit perhaps, included seventy officers and 2,000 men killed, wounded, or captured. Added to the human toll were large quantities of weapons and ammunition and all of the baggage of the American force.[6] Ten days after the defeat, only seven hundred troops had joined Gates at Hillsboro — the rest were dead, captured, or scattered through the forests and swamps of both Carolinas. Camden has been called "the most disastrous defeat ever inflicted on an American army." To add to the totality of the disaster, Sumter's force was nearly annihilated two days later at nearby Fishing Creek. North Carolina now seemed to lay open to Cornwallis.

Curiously, Cornwallis chose to march northwest toward Charlotte (Charlotte Town), which lay in the unfriendly Piedmont, instead of directly to the northeast toward Cross Creek, a Tory stronghold which lay along a route well within the necessary support of the British fleet. With South Carolina subdued, Charlotte was to be the jumping off point for the anticipated conquest of North Carolina and the subsequent sweep into Virginia. Thinking to mop up guerrilla activity which continued unabated to the southwest, Cornwallis had detached a large force of troops outside Camden under the comand of Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Ferguson, an experienced and able officer.

Ferguson was a most unusual and interesting man whose career merits a brief digression. Stationed in the backwater of the Caribbean Islands after the close of the Seven Years War, Ferguson invented a breech-loading rifle which enabled him to deliver seven aimed shots per minute. Considered to be the best marksman in the British Army, if not the world, his extraordinary feats with his rifle brought him fame and an audience before King George III. While participating in the Battle of Brandywine in September, 1777, an incident occurred which could have resulted in the ultimate defeat of the American cause. While Ferguson and a party of British soldiers lay concealed in the woods at the edge of a clearing one day, an American officer and his orderly rode into the clearing. When Ferguson called out for him to surrender, the officer wheeled his horse about and rode away. Undoubtedly Ferguson could easily have dispatched him, the distance being less than fifty yards, but he refrained, possibly not wishing to shoot him in the back. The next day Ferguson learned from a prisoner that the officer whose life he had spared was George Washington.[7]

Operating as an independent force, Ferguson tracked the rebel guerrilla forces through the western part of the state for more than a month following the British victory at Camden. The rebel forces, growing in

numbers almost daily, had recently been augmented by additional volunteers from the Watauga, Holston, and Clinch under Major Charles Robertson and Colonel Isaac Shelby. Irritated by this infusion into the rebel ranks, Ferguson added another mistake to the list which was to prove his undoing. In early September, he issued a rash threat to the mountaineers, sending word via a paroled prisoner that "if they [the mountaineers] did not desist from their opposition to the British arms, he would march his army over the mountains, hang their leaders, and lay their country waste with fire and sword."[8] The recent victory at Camden and the ensuing destruction of property belonging to suspected rebels throughout the foothills seemed to bear witness to Ferguson's capability and intent to carry out his threat.

The threat, while alarming the settlers in the valleys to the northwest, had an unforeseen effect upon them. Up to this time, the cause of the War for Independence had seemed to them but a distant quarrel which bore little significance to them. Many of them had migrated to the western valleys to escape the coastal settlements and their concerns, and were busily engaged in the hard struggle to win a living in the wilderness. Of immediate concern to most were the recent depredations of the Cherokees and Chickamaugas along the frontier. Although Isaac Shelby had been engaged in the bitter battles which had raged across South Carolina for several months, his appeal earlier that summer for volunteers from the Watauga region had met with only moderate response. Now, Ferguson's ill-advised threat made the cause of the colonists only too graphic to these settlers. Shelby and others hurried home with Ferguson's message, using it to raise companies of volunteers among the worried frontiersmen, who were easily persuaded to "get Ferguson" before he could carry out his theat.

Enlisting the aid of Colonel John Sevier near present day Jonesboro, Shelby combed the mountain valleys for volunteers, setting the time and place for the rendezvous of men and forces for September 25 at Sycamore Shoals on the Watauga River near what is now Elizabethton, Tennessee. Ferguson's threat and a temporary respite from the Indian menace combined to induce large numbers of the mountaineers to rally to the American cause, and on the twenty-sixth of September, fired up by a stirring semon and an apt analogy to Gideon by the Rev. Samuel Doak, the newly formed army set off with a will eastward through the mountains to surprise Ferguson.[9]

The men, numbering close to a thousand, carried few provisions and little equipment other than their muskets and ammunition. Parched corn and whatever provisions that could be obtained in the sparsely settled countryside would furnish the bulk of their rations during the journey. Marching along a route described by a participant as "the worst route ever travelled by an army," the mountaineers made only three miles the first day principally because of a small herd of cows driven along with the army as a source of food. The cows, foraging along the way and stampeding into the underbrush on occasion, con-

siderably hindered the progress of the column, but when healthy helpings of steak were added to the evening menu, the rate of march picked up markedly.

Crossing the mountains, the column was increased by the addition of about three hundred fifty men from Wilkes and Surrey counties (in North Carolina) under the command of Colonel Ben Cleveland and another body of troops from North Carolina under Colonel William McDowell. In the next few days, further reinforcements, including units from South Carolina and remnants of Gates' army which had scattered after Camden, joined the Wataugans. The process of stalking the prey began, and in the following days, a number of minor skirmishes were fought in the hills and valleys along the North Carolina-South Carolina border west of Charlotte. Ferguson, waiting for expected support from his commander at Charlotte, thirty-five miles to the Northeast, chose to adopt a defensive position atop a low ridge called "King's Mountain," where he declared that he "defied God Almighty and all the rebels from Hell to overcome him."

When intelligence as to the location of the main body of Ferguson's troops reached Colonel Campbell, who had been selected as temporary commander of the expedition, it was decided to attack as soon as possible. On the morning of October 7, 1780, the patriot army deployed itself under its several commanders — Shelby, Sevier, Hambright, Williams, Lacy, Cleveland, Winston, Campbell, and McDowell — around the base of the mountain in preparation for a converging attack on the summit. Such an operation, under the best of conditions, is one of the most difficult military maneuvers to conduct successfully. Here at King's Mountain, the conditions were far from ideal, for although Campbell was nominally commander of all forces, the units had never fought together and each was virtually under its own command. Severe compartmentalization of the terrain and a lack of lateral communication further hampered the execution of what had to be a carefully coordinated, orchestrated maneuver if the attackers were to avoid firing into their own troops and leaving gaps through which the enemy could escape.[10] Moreover, although the attackers managed to approach Ferguson's lines within less than a quarter of a mile before being discovered, Campbell began the attack prematurely before Shelby's troops were in position by throwing off his coat and shouting, "Here they are, my brave boys — shout like hell and fight like devils!"

Fight like devils they did. Obeying the order of the day to prime their guns and fight to the death, the mountaineers charged up the steep slopes and, in an instant, fire and smoke poured through the underbrush and clearings, and the thunder of musketry echoed through the air. A distant observer later commented that the mountain resembled a volcano.

Although the attackers outnumbered the defenders by about 1800 to 1100 men, the defense in such a situation generally has the advant-

age, and three times the mountain men, unaccustomed to the bayonet, were thrown back by the Tories and British. Three times the mountaineers, inspired by Ferguson's threat to their homes and families, charged back up the slope, their long rifles decimating the enemy ranks. When it became apparent that the battle was lost, Ferguson mounted his horse and made a desperate dash for freedom. Over his tell-tale uniform he wore a hunting shirt, and he might have made good his escape but for two circumstances. An earlier wound had disabled his right arm, and his use of a left-handed sword, generally known among the patriots, gave him away. Moreover, Colonel Hambright, receiving intelligence that Ferguson had previously worn the shirt over his uniform, had warned his troops in his broken Pennsylvania Dutch accent, "when you see dot man mit a pig shirt on over his clothes, you may know who him is, and mark him mit your rifles."[11]

Mark him they did, and in a moment his body was riddled by the accurate fire of a dozen riflemen. With their leader dead, the resistance quickly collapsed. The slaughter continued for some minutes after the surrender. Some of the mountaineers, being unfamiliar with the meaning of a white flag, continued their fire. Others, revenging themselves upon their brothers at the Waxhaws, shouted "Give them Tarleton's Quarter," as they dispatched the surrendering enemy.[12]

In little more than forty-five minutes, the battle was over. Of Ferguson's force of more than a thousand, not a man escaped. Two hundred and twenty-four men were left dead on the battlefield, and more than nine hundred, many of them wounded, were captured and taken with the army as it retreated into North Carolina. Ferguson had paid dearly for his mistake in risking battle outside Cornwallis' capability of reinforcing him, and Cornwallis, finding himself unexpectedly in an exposed position at Charlotte, withdraw southward to the comparative safety of Winnsboro, where he set up defensive positions and remained for about three months. Many of the men of King's Mountain, the immediate threat to their homes taken care of, turned homeward, arriving in time to thwart an attack on the settlements there by the Cherokees. Others, including Isaac Shelby, stayed on as the patriot army continued to conduct guerrilla style raids on the British outposts, their numbers swollen by volunteers in the wake of the victory at King's Mountain. Disheartened by that victory, numbers of Tories deserted the British army, seriously diminishing its ranks in South Carolina.

Despite the defeat at King's Mountain, Cornwallis did not give up the overall strategy of conquering North Carolina and proceeding to the Chesapeake. Receiving intelligence that Benedict Arnold's force of 1,200 men in Virginia had cut off communications and reinforcements for the patriots in the south, he was emboldened to strike northward again. However, on January 17, 1781, disaster struck once more. When Nathaniel Green, who had replaced Gates in command of the American army in the south, divided his army into two forces, Cornwallis followed suit by detaching a force of about a thousand men under Tarleton and sending him to pursue Daniel Morgan. At Cowpens, not far from King's Mountain, Morgan's clever strategy resulted in almost complete victory

for the Americans. Although Tarleton himself escaped, about two-thirds of his army was killed and captured.

The crippling blows delivered to his army at King's Mountain and Cowpens and the necessity of securing South Carolina, now menaced by growing guerrilla forces in the west, should have dictated further delay in Cornwallis' plans to invade and subdue the Old North State. However, goaded perhaps by a spirit of revenge, Cornwallis followed in headlong pursuit after Green and Morgan. At Guilford Court House (near the present city of Greensboro, North Carolina), Cornwallis inflicted a defeat upon the Americans, though the victory cost his own army dearly in casualties. At this point, Cornwallis veered sharply southeastward to the Carolina coast, where he refitted and rorganized his army before moving northward along the coast into Virginia, implementing at last the grand strategy spelled out for him nearly a year before by Clinton. The strategy ultimately was to bring him to a small town on a Virginia cape called Yorktown, where the war for the British ended for all practical purposes.

It is in the consideration of the Battle of Yorktown that one realizes the full significance of King's Mountain and the ancillary battle of Cowpens. At Yorktown, the importance of timing was preeminent. Had Cornwallis and an army not weakened by those defeats arrived in Virginia months early — as planned — the timely arrival of the French fleet under de Grasse and all of the other fortuitous circumstances that resulted in the American victory at Yorktown would have meant nothing.[13] Although it is impossible, even with the benefit of nearly two hundred years of hindsight, to project the ensuing events and their effects on the outcome of the war, it seems likely that the British army might well have been able to carry out the grand strategy planned so optimistically at Whitehall during the dark days of 1779.

Much of the credit for the stunning victory at King's Mountain and the ultimate frustration of British hopes for winning the war must go to the men of Watauga, who comprised the bulk of the forces at that battle. In seeking to defend their homes from the incursions of Ferguson, they played a vital role in the winning of American independence and it is through those men that the people of the Jackson Purchase have a direct link with the Revolution. Following the war, Shelby and others moved into Kentucky, settling at Boonesboro and other localities in the eastern part of the state. These are the ancestors of a number of present day citizens in this area. More are descendants, however, of soldiers who accepted land grants along the Cumberland in Tennessee whose descendants moved on into the Purchase after it was acquired from the Chickasaw in 1818. Curiously, two of the commanders at King's Mountain were to win further fame as governors of the new states of Tennessee and Kentucky. John Sevier became the first governor of Tennessee, and Isaac Shelby served as first chief executive of Kentucky. Although Shelby was to win many honors as governor and for his role in the War of 1818, to the day he died, he was proudest of the nickname he had won in the war many years earlier, "Old King's Mountain."

1. The British force, supported by naval vessels, has been estimated variously at between thirteen and eighteen thousand men — one of the largest forces assembled by the royal cause during the American war.

2. Lincoln's defense of the city was considerably hampered by the refusal of South Carolina militia from the surrounding country side to enter the city because of an outbreak of smallpox there.

3. William B. Willcox, ed., **The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton's Narrative of His Campaigns, 1775-1782 . . .** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 171. Losses among the English troops amounted to only 268 killed and wounded.

4. Banastre Tarleton, **A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces of North America** (New York: New York Times, 1968), p. 80.

5. Clinton Papers, quoted in William B. Willcox, **Portrait of a General: Sir Henry Clinton in the War of Independence** (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 320.

6. Tarleton, **History,** p. 109. British losses were slightly more than three hundred.

7. Although one can make too much of Ferguson's humanitarian motives, he certainly was no butcher like Tarleton. Unfortunately for Ferguson, as we shall see, Tarleton's reputation was sometimes erroneously applied to him in the minds of the Carolina patriots.

8. Lyman C. Draper, **King's Mountain and Its Heroes: History of the Battle of King's Mountain . . .** (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1967), p. 169.

9. The body was unexpectedly swelled by the arrival of Colonel Campbell and his force of two hundred men from the southwestern counties of Virginia.

10. Many of the participants on both sides wore no recognizable uniforms, adding to the confusion and difficulty of coordinating the attack. The Tories often identified themselves by placing a piece of paper in their hats, while the rebels identified themselves with pine sprigs.

11. Quoted in Draper, **King's Mountain and Its Heroes,** p. 233.

12. Some historians have speculated that Ferguson was the unfortunate and undeserved beneficiary of the resentment built up over a period of months at the savagery of Tarleton, the reputation being transferred in the patriots' minds to Ferguson.

13. The magnitude of the effect of the loss at King's Mountain cannot be appreciated from the number of casualties the British suffered in that battle alone. Not only did the British suffer galling casualties they could ill afford, the defeats served to revivify the American cause and dispirit the Tories. Carolinians flocked to the American colors, manning the guerrilla attacks on the vital British outposts in South Carolina and pinning down valuable troops which might have otherwise been spared for the northern campaign.